

Photo-Management Software

Taking digital snaps is easy, but finding them again on your PC can be tricky. Ben Pitt tests some software to sort his life out

Few people would contest the liberating qualities of digital photography. Because there are no film or developing costs to worry about, there's almost no limit to how many shots you can take. What's more, the digital format means they're immediately ready for tweaking, sharing and incorporating into projects. However, a bunch of overstuffed folders on a hard disk doesn't really compare to a leather-bound album of lovingly selected, arranged and labelled photos.

The answer for some people is to print photos, but there is another solution. Photo-management software helps you keep your photos organised, choose the best ones, improve their appearance, view them and share them with others. There are also packages aimed at serious photographers that include sophisticated tools to embed watermarks and copyright information, handle RAW camera formats and plenty more besides.

GET ORGANISED

When digital cameras capture a picture, various extra data, called EXIF data, is written into the image file. This includes the shutter speed, white balance mode, the camera model and the time the photo was taken. The latter is particularly useful as, unlike the dates on Windows files, this EXIF capture date won't change when the file is copied or edited.

The first thing photo-management software does is to get your photos in order. All the programs here can sort photos by EXIF capture date. Most of them can also edit the capture date for batches of photos.

Software aimed at keen photographers also provides access to other parts of the EXIF data. This allows them to search for a picture taken with a specific camera or lens, or to find just the shots that were taken at ISO 100. Viewing photos alongside their exposure settings can be a useful learning experience that helps you understand how to get the best from your camera.

Other types of metadata are used to add keywords and captions to photos. These are added manually, and while doing so for large collections can be laborious, it's rewarding to be able to find all the pictures of your three best friends together in the same photo simply by selecting their names on a keyword list.

Metadata can also include the photographer's name and contact details, copyright details and a vast range of other information, although only the more sophisticated programs in this round-up can access these fields. These packages also include flagging, colour-coding and star-rating facilities, which are perfect for sorting through batches of pictures to find the best. Professional photographers will find this invaluable for sorting through photo shoots, while home users can pare down holiday snaps to a sensible number for sharing with others.

REPAIRING AND SHARING

Once you've found the pictures you want, the packages here let you arrange them into custom albums, and all but one include editing tools, too. These aren't the same as those you'll find in dedicated image-editing software – you can't cut and paste sections or start a new image from scratch, for example – but their rotation, colour-correction, blemish removal and red-eye reduction functions are specifically tailored for optimising photos. You can then view them as a full-screen slideshow and export in a variety of formats for sharing with others.

All the packages include comprehensive printing options, most can export smaller copies directly to email software and generate HTML galleries for posting on websites, and some can generate PDF or video slideshows. The free packages also integrate with photo-sharing websites, so you don't need to rent webspace in order to get your photos online.



◀ Use multiple keywords to find photos of your favourite people together

SOFTWARE LABS

THIS MONTH

ACD Systems ACDSee 9 Photo Manager

Page 131

ACD Systems ACDSee Pro Photo Manager

Page 131

Adobe Photoshop Album Starter Edition 3.2

Page 130

Adobe Photoshop Lightroom 1.1

Page 132

BR Software PixFiler 5

Page 131

Google Picasa 2.7

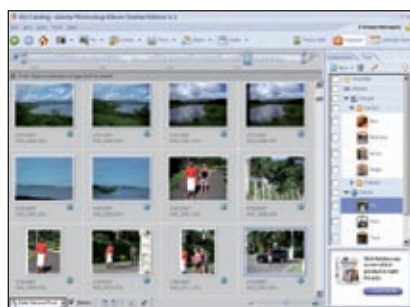
Page 130

Magix Photo Manager 2006

Page 130

Microsoft Expression Media

Page 132



▲ A timeline at the top of the screen lets users jump to photos from a particular month

ADOBE Photoshop Album Starter Edition 3.2

★★★★

Free

Photoshop Album Starter Edition is probably best known for sneaking on to people's PCs when they install Adobe Reader and bugging them every time they connect a camera or memory card. However, it does have some positive attributes, too.

Photos are arranged by capture date, with a timeline along the top of the screen that lets you jump to a specific month. You can also sort by folder or import date, but the timeline is a clumsy way of jumping to a specific folder – strangely, there's no folder tree view. A Calendar View displays a month-per-page calendar with thumbnails for days that contain photos. Sadly, you can't zoom in and out to show a week or a year at a time.

Keywords are created in the Tags panel, and you assign them to photos by dragging one on to the other – either tags on to photos or photos on to tags. Filtering by multiple tags brings up photos that match all tags, and if there aren't any, photos that match any of the tags. These are presented as Best and Close matches, which is a great way to present a sophisticated feature in a way that makes sense to casual users. It's not possible to search or filter using EXIF data.

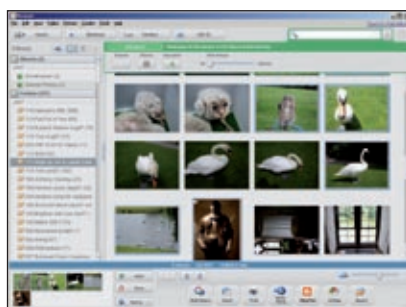
Editing is limited to automatic colour correction, cropping and red-eye removal, and rotation is only in 90° twists. Export destinations include PDF slideshows and email (via Outlook or Hotmail) but not HTML galleries. Photos can be uploaded directly to Kodak EasyShare Gallery, but this awkward website is geared more towards selling prints, mugs and aprons than displaying photos.

Photoshop Album Starter Edition isn't as elegant or as powerful as Picasa, but it's the only free application that can edit capture dates, which could prove to be an essential feature for tidying up photo libraries.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Simple and straightforward
- ✓ Elegant keyword management
- ✗ Limited editing and export features

PHOTO-MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP (SP2)/Vista, 500MHz processor, 128MB RAM (256MB recommended), 50MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.adobe.com/uk
DETAILS www.adobe.com/uk



▲ Google's free tool looks flash and provides plenty of powerful features for casual users

GOOGLE Picasa 2.7

★★★★★

Free



Picasa makes a fantastic first impression with its animated interface that scrolls and fades in an extremely luxurious manner. Photos are arranged by source folder in chronological order, via an animated carousel-style timeline or in a conventional folder tree view. Sadly, it's not possible to fix incorrect capture dates.

Its editing features are superb, with a wide range of automatic and manual colour-correction tools, free rotation, red-eye reduction and some genuinely attractive special effects. Best of all, edits are non-destructive, and a full undo history is stored as part of the photo database, although you can choose to save changes at any time, too.

Keyword support seems a bit of an afterthought, with a floating dialog box for adding keywords and no categories such as People and Places available. Filtering by keyword is incredibly quick, but can be done only with a free text search and not from a list of used keywords. However, a new feature in version 2 enables you to create custom albums of pictures from different locations.

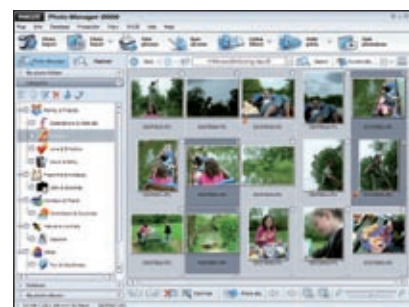
Export options include animated video slideshows, CD-ROM, email (via Outlook or Google Mail), HTML galleries and uploading directly to Google's Blogger and Picasa Web Albums sites. Photos are resized before upload, and the 1GB online capacity is enough for thousands of photos at modest dimensions. There isn't much scope to customise the look of the galleries, but a new feature synchronises photo albums with Google Maps, enabling you to browse photos geographically – a fantastic idea that works beautifully. HTML codes are available for embedding images and slideshows on websites such as MySpace.

There are a few additional features we would like to see, but Picasa's elegant interface, excellent editing tools and online gallery integration make it perfect for casual users.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Simple and effective
- ✓ Integrates with excellent online gallery service
- ✗ Missing a few useful features

PHOTO-MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP/Vista, 300MHz processor, 64MB RAM (128MB recommended), 50MB disk space
SUPPLIER <http://picasa.google.co.uk>
DETAILS <http://picasa.google.co.uk>



▲ Magix Photo Manager may be free, but its confusing interface will put off potential users

MAGIX Photo Manager 2006

★

Free

Photo Manager 2006 is thrown in with pretty much every other Magix application, but it's also available as a free download. Photos are sorted by folder, date and keywords, and can be placed in custom albums, although we found the latter fairly confusing to manage.

Edits are non-destructive, so the source files remain unchanged and edits can be undone at a later date. A Straighten Horizon option makes it easy to rotate pictures, but the red-eye removal tool is rather crude and the Auto-colour function tended to make pictures worse.

Only Hotmail users can use the software's email export, and the general-purpose export routine – necessary for permanently saving edited photos – is confusing. Burning photos to optical disc and printing them out was more straightforward, though.

The strongest feature by far is integration with Magix Online Album. Photos are uploaded at one of four quality settings, and the Flash-based website allows comprehensive image and gallery management, with smart slideshow templates that can be customised by viewers. You get 500MB of capacity free, while £3.50 a month buys 2GB of space, more templates and the ability to edit images after uploading them.

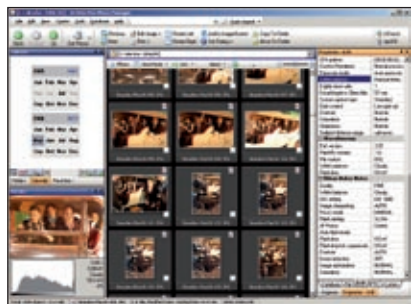
Sadly, the software proved unresponsive, and buggy. When sorting by date, most photos were uncategorised, and even when we selected a specific folder, photos were often missing. The cluttered, sprawling interface meant we struggled with even the simplest tasks, such as adding a keyword or exiting the Optimise Photo view. Thumbnails were slow to appear, and slideshows responded lethargically to requests for the next picture.

Photo Manager 2006 doesn't excel in any area, as even its strongest features are outgunned by Picasa and others. With so many flaws, it's not worth the time and effort.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent web gallery integration
- ✗ Confusing interface
- ✗ Serious flaws to the photo database in our tests

PHOTO-MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, 600MHz Pentium II processor, 96MB RAM, 250MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.magix.com/uk
DETAILS www.magix.com/uk



▲ Powerful features make ACDSee 9 a good choice for impoverished enthusiasts

ACD SYSTEMS
ACDSee 9
Photo Manager

★★★★★
£20 inc VAT

Despite its home user-oriented price, this has lots of powerful features to tempt photography enthusiasts. It took 13 minutes to catalogue our library of 15,000 photos, after which searches and previews were virtually instant and images' EXIF data was fully catalogued.

You can sort and filter photos in three ways. On the left is a folder explorer, which you can switch to a Calendar view with options to filter by hour, day, month or year. On the right, an Organise panel filters photos by keywords, user ratings and any EXIF metadata except capture date. There's an option to switch between photos that match any or all criteria, so it's easy to find photos that match two keywords. The Calendar and Organise panels don't work simultaneously, though, so you can't find all pictures with a particular keyword from a specific date. However, the central thumbnail area has comprehensive Filter by, Sort by and Group by options, so you can sort by any conceivable permutation of criteria, although this can be convoluted.

Editing tools go further than most, with colour correction, blemish removal and basic sharpening and noise-reduction tools, but casual users will find cryptic labels such as RGB and HSL unhelpful. Export options are impressive, too, with the ability to create HTML, Flash, PDF, screensaver and standalone (.exe) galleries and slideshows. However, we encountered a few frustrations, such as the lack of an option to resize photos before exporting to PDF. Flash exports sometimes lost their correct aspect ratio, making everything look squashed, and HTML galleries were a little ugly. Sadly, online gallery space isn't provided.

The free Picasa software is better for home users, but ACDSee is perfect for photography enthusiasts on a tight budget.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Comprehensive sorting and filtering options
- ✓ Powerful colour-correction and retouching tools
- ✗ Fairly complex for home users

PHOTO-MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP/Vista, Pentium III processor, 256MB RAM, 100MB disk space (Pentium 4, 512MB RAM, 1GB space recommended)
SUPPLIER www.acdsee.com
DETAILS www.acdsee.com



▲ PixFiler looks a little dated and lacks features that many free alternatives provide

BR SOFTWARE
PixFiler 5

★★★
£24 inc VAT

PixFiler looks clunky and dated compared with other packages, but at first glance it seems straightforward. A collection of sorting criteria on the left includes keywords and date by year or month. Photos appear as thumbnails, with the selected one displayed in a preview window. Full-screen previews and slideshows are available, but PixFiler is the only software here not to offer transitions for its slideshows.

Importing our 15,000 photos was quick at just over six minutes, but thumbnails were not cached. Instead, they were generated when we tried to view them, and at up to one second per image, this made the software extremely slow and frustrating to use at first. However, after about an hour, the software had worked through the collection, and browsing became responsive. Thumbnails didn't look great, though, with a lack of anti-aliasing causing subjects and particularly faces to look oddly skewed. Filenames had been replaced by an arbitrary number for each photo.

Keywords are arranged into categories, events and places, but strangely not people. Whereas other packages assign keywords using drag and drop, PixFiler has a convoluted Annotate dialog box, and a separate Bulk Update box is required to add keywords to multiple photos. Adding two-word location names worked fine, but two-word categories appeared as two separate entries in the Categories list. Various cryptic labels such as Mode From-To ID add to the feeling that PixFiler isn't designed for ease of use.

Image editing isn't included, but you can send photos to another application. Export options comprise optical media and hard disk folder (with straightforward resizing options), printing and basic HTML export, but there's no online gallery integration, export-to-email function or option to order prints online.

There's no reason to buy PixFiler when free software is more powerful and easier to use.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Straightforward in some areas
- ✗ Awkward in other areas
- ✗ No image-editing tools

PHOTO-MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98 SE/Me/NT4/2000/XP, 500MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 5MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.pixfiler.com
DETAILS www.pixfiler.com



▲ ACDSee Pro adds a few more sophisticated tools to those of the standard version

ACD SYSTEMS
ACDSee Pro
Photo Manager

★★★★★
£61 inc VAT

The standard version of ACDSee Photo Manager (see left) isn't lacking in power, but this Pro version adds various features that are designed for advanced users.

Additional features on top of those in the standard version include colour-management profiles, non-destructive editing of RAW camera (but sadly not JPEG) files and saving and recalling of workspace layouts. The latter is long-winded and not as thorough as it should be, though. ACDSee Pro has 44 creative special effects to the standard version's 33, and a Distortion Correction tool removes barrel and pincushion distortions from photos taken at extreme zoom settings. The simple Tag tick-box next to each thumbnail is perfect for making quick, temporary selections.

The standard version supports renaming and metadata-editing for batches of photos, and ACDSee Pro expands this with batch resizing, format conversion and colour correction. A Batch Processor scripting utility combines all the above plus noise removal, sharpening, text overlay and watermarks. The latter would typically be a logo or copyright notice, and an opacity slider and various blend modes help watermarks blend with the photo. To create a cutout shape, we had to define a colour to be transparent by typing in numerical RGB values, which is hardly the friendliest method. Other parts of the interface could be streamlined but, in general, the businesslike appearance should appeal to advanced users.

ACDSee Pro doesn't offer three times as much as the standard version, which its price might suggest, but it's still highly affordable, and the RAW support and batch-processing features make it an excellent choice for photography enthusiasts who can't stretch to Adobe Photoshop Lightroom.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Highly accomplished range of functions
- ✓ Businesslike interface
- ✗ Destructive JPEG editing

PHOTO-MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP/Vista, Pentium III processor, 256MB RAM, 100MB disk space (Pentium 4, 512MB RAM, 1GB space recommended)
SUPPLIER www.acdsee.com
DETAILS www.acdsee.com

ADOBE

Photoshop Lightroom 1.1

★★★★★

£160 inc VAT



When we first reviewed Lightroom (*What's New, Shopper* July 2007) we were won over by its sublime photo organising, editing and sharing tools. Its price has risen slightly since then, but version 1.1 fixes some of the few flaws we could find in the first release.

It looks and feels extremely luxurious, with subtle design flourishes and a neutral colour scheme that won't clash with photos. It needs a high-resolution monitor, though, and doesn't spread over two screens. The interface is divided into five modes: Library for organising photos, Develop for editing them and Slideshow, Print and Web for export to PDF, paper and HTML or Flash. A Navigator at the top left shows a larger thumbnail of whatever the mouse is hovering over, including lists of keywords, folders and undo histories. In Library mode, the preview area switches between thumbnails, fit-to-screen and actual size previews, and selected pictures can be viewed side by side for comparison and annotation.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Powerful, non-destructive editing tools
- ✓ Sublime interface
- ✗ No online gallery space provided

PHOTO-MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE

Requires Windows XP (SP2)/Vista, Pentium 4 processor, 768MB RAM (1GB recommended), 1GB disk space
 SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
 DETAILS www.adobe.com/uk

Photos are filtered by folder location, file type, keyword, date, camera model, lens specification, aperture, shutter speed, ISO speed and a range of other metadata. Adding keywords, colour labels, ratings and flags and even rotating photos and applying editing presets is fast, thanks to a Painter tool that carries out these actions with a single click. Filtering by multiple criteria from different categories is easy, and the Find panel makes locating pictures that match multiple keywords quick. Keywords can be nested into categories and subcategories.

Lightroom's editing tools go way beyond anything else here, and even beyond Adobe

Photoshop CS3 for fixing colours in digital photos (see our July 2007 review for more on these features). The non-destructive approach means multiple tweaks won't degrade image quality. We're delighted to see that sharpening and noise reduction is much improved in version 1.1 –



▲ Lightroom 1.1 is the pinnacle of photo-management software, with a smart interface and powerful search and editing tools

making Lightroom an excellent choice for RAW file processing – although barrel and pincushion distortion compensation is missing. The export modes include options to customise the layout and add text extracted from picture metadata, and Lightroom has the best-looking HTML and Flash templates in this group test.

Lightroom is considerably more powerful than the other programs here, and with the possible exception of Picasa it's the most pleasant to use. We'd like it even more if online gallery space were included, as it is with the free packages. Professional photographers will want to upload to their own website, but Lightroom is equally suited to amateur enthusiasts who want to share their photos with friends and family.

MICROSOFT

Expression Media

★★

£234 inc VAT

Expression Media is the new name for iView MediaPro, which Microsoft acquired in 2006. We reviewed MediaPro 3 in *What's New, Shopper* February 2006, and found it to be a capable package, but one that didn't justify its £120 asking price. Sadly, the main difference between the two versions other than the name change is a massive price hike.

Still, Expression Media has some powerful features that serious photographers will appreciate, including colour profiles, RAW format support and batch format conversion. One of our favourite features is the ability to customise the thumbnail display window, not only in terms of its layout and colour scheme, but also the details that appear under each photo. Photos can also be viewed as a list with very small thumbnails followed by metadata. A Light Table view collates selected photos for full-screen viewing, where they can be switched, zoomed and labelled using short cuts. Onscreen slideshows are well catered for, too, with extensive collating, captioning and transition options available.

The software launches with an empty database,

which suggests that users are expected to keep separate databases for different photo shoots. It lends itself well to this approach, with comprehensive facilities to synchronise metadata to and from photos and to merge databases. Filtering options seem comprehensive, but there's plenty of room for improvement. The Date Finder is organised hierarchically by year, month and day, but only specific days can be selected, so to see all photos from a particular month you must select each day in turn while holding the Ctrl key. Selecting combinations of labels, ratings, dates and keywords finds photos that match all the criteria, but filtering by more than one keyword brings up photos that match any of these keywords. The

only way to find photos that match them all is via the convoluted Find dialog box.

Image editing is basic and cumbersome even compared with the free products. Red-eye reduction doesn't invite the user to specify the offending pupil, and also reduced lipstick,



▲ Microsoft has given an old program a new name and a higher price, turning a pretty good tool into one to avoid

jewellery and skin tones. Handling of original and edited versions of files is awkward, too.

Print options are comprehensive, but the software prints all pictures in the thumbnail area rather than just those selected, and doesn't automatically rotate pictures to make the most of the available paper. HTML export is much better, with a range of templates, comprehensive image quality controls and the ability to upload directly to an FTP location. However, the only slideshow export option is as a QuickTime video, with no animated web or PDF export.

Expression Media is mostly excellent, but its cost far outweighs its capabilities. It seems to be priced to make Microsoft's Expression Studio bundle seem good value rather than to encourage people to buy Expression Media. **CS**

SUMMARY

- ✓ Professionally oriented
- ✗ Basic image-editing tools
- ✗ Seriously overpriced

PHOTO-MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE Requires Windows XP (SP2)/Vista, 1GHz processor, 1GB RAM, 100MB disk space
 SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
 DETAILS www.microsoft.com/expression